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ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE DROPOUTS--SOME MANIFEST AND COVERT REASONS.

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THE REASONS STUDENTS DROP OUT OF COLLEGE WERE EXPLORED. THE SUBJECTS WERE 250 FULL-TIME STUDENTS WHO HAD WITHDRAWN FROM COLLEGE DURING ONE SEMESTER. EACH SUBJECT COMPLETED A FORM LISTING A VARIETY OF REASONS FOR WITHDRAWAL. THE STUDENTS WERE ALSO ASKED TO TALK WITH A COUNSELOR AT THEIR CONVENIENCE. FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW, THE COUNSELOR COMPLETED A FORM GIVING AN INTERPRETATION OF THE STUDENT'S PRIMARY REASON FOR WITHDRAWAL. THERE WERE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE MALES THAN FEMALES LEAVING SCHOOL. A DISPARITY EXISTED BETWEEN REASONS FOR WITHDRAWAL AS STATED BY THE STUDENTS AND AS SEEN BY THE COUNSELOR. NEED FOR EMPLOYMENT WAS THE MOST POPULAR REASON CITED BY STUDENTS. COUNSELORS BELIEVED THE PRIMARY REASONS TO BE MOTIVATION OR POOR PERFORMANCE. IT APPEARS THAT CARE NEEDS TO BE TAKEN IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF REASONS FOR STUDENT WITHDRAWALS FROM COLLEGE. THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN PERSONNEL AND GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION CONVENTION, DALLAS, TEXAS, MARCH, 1967. (SK)

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ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE DROPOUTS - SOME MANIFEST AND COVERT REASONS

by

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Most of the research dealing with college dropouts indicates that nationally about 50% of the students attending colleges and universities drop out before securing an undergraduate degree. To be sure, some of these students return to college at a later date and do, in fact, obtain degrees. Summerskill (1962) indicates that approximately 20% graduate at some college, sometime later, which would still leave a sizeable percentage who fail to complete their college education after once dropping out.

These losses in human resources should represent very serious concerns for all of us involved in educational ventures, if not society at large (Gowan and Demos, 1964). We live in a century which has seen the demand for professional personnel doubled in every single decade. We are now faced with a shortage of trained professional talent in almost every field of endeavor--science, teaching, religion, business, and especially the medical profession. Education has and will continue to have the challenging problem of retraining and upgrading a larger and larger proportion of the educable talent of this country. We live in a time in which we have been brought face-to-face with the full implications of our scientific and technological advancements. The stake in this race is nothing short of our survival. The alarming attrition rate in many of our institutions of higher education represents a serious threat to our society as we know it today, let alone the pain and frustration that accompanies less

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than optimal achievement. The purpose of this study was to carefully delineate some specific reasons as to why such a large percentage of students withdraw before completing their college education. It is known that large numbers of students leave college each year because they cannot meet the academic standards set for them. In some institutions it is as high as 50% of the freshman class who are academically disqualified after one year of college work. Since the primary objective of colleges is to educate its students, academic disqualifications should be viewed as a failure, at least to some degree, on the part of the institution as well as on the part of the disqualified student.

Of primary importance to colleges throughout the country is to conduct immediate and longitudinal research with regard to institutional practices that contribute to what apparently are unrealistically high attrition rates. Many students who withdraw from college give reasons as to their leaving which may or may not be valid reasons for their separation. Secondly, as was pointed out in Summerskill's excellent review of the literature (1962), there is a discrepancy in the relative value given to certain variables by the dropouts themselves, when compared with those given by clinicians. The clinicians give considerably more weight to emotional factors as important reasons for attrition than do the dropouts. Farnsworth (1959) states: "No reliable statistics are available as to how many of those who leave college do so because of emotional conflicts. However, we have good reasons to believe that in some institutions the proportion is considerably more than half." This would indicate that one should be chary of attaching much validity to the manifest reasons given by college dropouts themselves relative to their separation from college. It has also been well established that there is undoubtedly

multicausality in dropping out of college. Several studies have established that most dropouts occur because of a variety of reasons and causes (Farnsworth, 1959; Iffert, 1957; Feder, 1950).

In view of these data, it was felt that counselors conducting in-depth interviews would be able to note other more valid reasons for dropping out than those typically given by the students themselves. It was assumed that the counselors would be able to secure more valid indications of the causes of withdrawal than the students themselves. It was also felt that the counselors would be more apt to detect unconscious motivation and certain defense mechanisms utilized by the dropouts and; thus, determine the "real" reasons for their leaving the institution.

Procedure

During a period of one semester, all of the dropouts were asked to complete a form which listed a variety of reasons for withdrawal. The students were then asked to talk with a counselor as part of the normal procedure for dropping out of school. Three counselors performed the interviewing and were able to see the students on a drop-in basis.[1]

After the relatively unstructured interview with the student, the counselor then completed the form which asked for the counselor's interpretation of the primary reasons for the student dropping from college. Particular care was given to devising the dropout form to provide a comprehensive coverage of the myriad reasons for attrition. Considerable time was also given to

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[1]Appreciation is given to Dr. David Wolfe and Dr. Marjorie Dole of the Counseling Center staff, California State College at Long Beach, for their help in interviewing these prospective dropouts and completing the forms which provided the basis for this study.

planning, preparation and discussion of the interpretation and use of the form. Thus, the researcher was satisfied that considerable reliability existed in the ratings of the three counselors involved in their judging. However, a reliability check was not considered feasible. It was felt that the students could not be expected to go through a separation interview three times with three different counselors. In most instances the students were eager to terminate, and they were not likely subjects for an intensive study.

Two hundred and fifty full-time students who had withdrawn and had completely separated from college participated in the study. Students who merely reduced their academic loads were not interviewed, as well as some students who withdrew because of serious illness or withdrew through the mail. The majority of the full-time students who withdrew, however, were interviewed by one of the three counselors involved in the study. An interesting concomitant effect of these interviews, which speaks well for the advantages of terminal interviews, was that approximately 10% of the students who were planning to withdraw decided against it as a direct result of an interview with a counselor.

This represented a considerable saving in human resources which, in itself, represents a justification for these services to continue. (Terminal interviews have continued to occur on the California State College at Long Beach campus primarily for this reason.)

It was not the intent of the counselor to dissuade the student from withdrawing, but merely to discuss with him his reasons for leaving, his feelings

about the institution, etc., and to ask him to fill out the withdrawal form. Occasionally a student was given some information which changed his mind about withdrawing, such as a student in financial difficulty who was informed that he was eligible for an NDEA loan, work-study or a short-term loan. Sometimes they were referred for personal counseling, as a result of the problems they were confronted with at that time which precipitated their contemplating leaving. A variety of other kinds of informational help was given which did have an effect on changing the minds, attitudes and decisions of some students.

Table I indicates the size of the sample and a breakdown by class. It is interesting to note the significant difference between the number of male and female dropouts. Summerskill (1962) found that the dropout rate for males and females was approximately equal, despite the fact that fewer women matriculate to college. This study, however, indicated that there were significantly more males leaving school than females.

Findings:

Table II gives the reasons for withdrawal and compares the reasons given by the student and by the counselor. An examination of the table indicates a disparity between the reasons given by these two groups. Twenty-four percent of the male and 21% of the female students stated that they needed a job. The job area represented 41% of the male reasons for leaving and 32% of the female reasons for leaving. The counselor, on the other hand, assigned considerably fewer reasons as falling within the area of the job. In other words,

Table I

Composition of Dropout Sample Interviewed at
California State College at Long Beach

MALE	N	FEMALE	N
Freshmen	33	Freshmen	40
Sophomore	28	Sophomore	13
Junior	45	Junior	16
Senior	24	Senior	11
Graduate	10	Graduate	5
Uncertain	17	Uncertain	8
Total Male	157	Total Female	93

Total Sample Size = 250

Table II

Reasons for Withdrawal
(Given by Student and by Counselor)

			MALE				FEMALE			
			Stated Reason		Counselor's Interpretation		Stated Reason		Counselor's Interpretation	
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I.	a.	Doctor's orders	6	4	3	1	18	17	17	15
	b.	Personal decision (Illness)	12	7	12	6	8	8	8	7
II.	a.	Need job (Financial problems)	39	24	28	14	22	21	15	13
	b.	Additional job	4	2	1	.5	2	2	1	.5
	c.	Work conflict	9	6	7	4	2	2	1	.5
	d.	Temporary job	6	4	5	3	1	1	1	1
	e.	New permanent job	8	5	5	3	6	6	3	3
III.	a.	Military service	15	9	8	4	0	0	0	0
IV.	a.	Illness in family	11	7	12	6	7	7	7	6
	b.	Death in family	1	1	1	.5	0	0	0	0
V.	a.	Getting married	0	0	1	.5	7	7	6	5
	b.	Additions to family	3	2	3	1	0	0	3	3
	c.	Marital conflicts	5	3	7	4	1	.5	4	4
	d.	Parental conflicts	2	1	3	1	2	2	4	4
VI.	a.	Family moving	5	3	5	3	6	6	6	5
	b.	Job transfer	1	1	1	.5	0	0	1	1
	c.	Leaving area	4	2	2	1	0	0	0	0
	d.	Transfer to another college	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	3
	e.	Transportation problem	1	1	0	0	2	2	0	0
VII.	a.	Work difficult	7	4	21	11	1	.5	2	2
	b.	Lack of motivation	8	5	24	12	2	2	9	8
	c.	Uncertainty as to major	4	2	19	10	3	3	5	4
	d.	Poor grades	2	1	4	2	3	3	4	4
VIII.	a.	Personal, emotional or (psychological) problems.	8	5	21	11	8	8	12	11
		TOTALS	163	100%	196[2]	100%	103	100%	112[2]	100%

[2]Differences due to multiple interpretations by counselors.

it appeared that securing a job was a popular reason given by students for leaving school, but in one-half of the cases this was not their primary reason for leaving as interpreted by the counselors.

Needing a job is a relatively safe nonpunitive justification for withdrawing from college, and was by far the most popular reason given by the students, but the counselors found that this was in many cases a secondary or tertiary reason; the primary reasons were more likely to be in the motivational and/or poor academic performance areas. It was a rare student who came into the center and stated, "My reason for dropping out is that I am a poor student;" or "I lack motivation;" or "I am failing in my courses." They are more likely to say "I need a job," or "I have financial problems," etc. Further examination of Table II indicates that uncertainty as to major, the work being too difficult for the student and psychological problems were listed as being more important reasons for dropping out of college by the counselor than by the students. The same general pattern was apparent for both males and females with the exception of military service, which was a more prevalent reason for the males than the females, and marriage being more prevalent with the females than the males.

Table III summarizes the results of certain questions asked of the counselors regarding their evaluations of additional reasons for the students' withdrawal from college. The students did not complete this section of the form--but the counselors were asked to make an evaluation as to some of the students' attitudes. An examination of the various questions reveals the following:

A. Attitude Toward College - Positive attitudes generally were prevalent among students who were withdrawing. This finding was contrary to previous hypothesized thinking of the counselors. It was felt that students who dropped out in all probability had developed negative attitudes or were angry toward the institution. This was not found to be the case.

B. Change in Attitude as Result of Counseling - One interview did not apparently change the attitudes of the student toward his reasons for withdrawing or his reconsideration to stay in the majority of cases. The interviews usually varied in length from 10 minutes to one hour depending upon the motivation of the student involved. But it was the feeling of the counselors that a sizeable number of the students changed their attitudes moderately as a result of this one interview.

C. Nature of Reasons for Withdrawing - The nature of the reasons for withdrawing seem to be quite specific. Most students had specific reasons for leaving. They were usually not vague or diffuse. They were frequently due to several variables.

D. Decisiveness in Reasons for Withdrawing - Their decision to withdraw was usually decisive. The students who were ambivalent usually decided to change their minds or to delay a decision until a later date. Most of the students had given considerable thought to why they were leaving and were rather decisive in those reasons.

E. Reasons Common Among Withdrawing Students - The reasons given were ones generally expected to be given as indicated by the review of the

Table III

Terminating Counselor's Evaluation of Reasons for Withdrawal from College

	MALE		FEMALE	
	N	%	N	%
A. Attitude Toward College				
Very Positive	11	7	8	9
Positive	89	59	59	66
Indifferent	36	24	14	16
Negative	9	6	4	5
Very Negative	1	1	1	1
No Answer	4	3	3	3
	N=150	100%	N=89	100%
B. Change in Attitude as Result of Counseling				
Definitely	8	5	4	5
Moderately	41	27	20	23
Not Apparently	92	62	60	68
Definitely Not	5	3	2	2
No Answer	4	3	2	2
	N=150	100%	N=88	100%
C. Nature of Reasons for Withdrawing				
Very Precise	24	16	15	17
Specific	84	56	56	62
Diffusive	32	21	16	18
Very Vague	6	4	1	1
No Answer	4	3	2	2
	N=150	100%	N=90	100%
D. Decisiveness in Reasons for Withdrawing				
Decisive	98	65	70	79
Ambivalent	28	19	9	10
Indeterminate	14	9	7	8
Evasive	3	2	0	0
Secretive	3	2	1	1
No Answer	4	3	2	2
	N=150	100%	N=89	100%
E. Reasons Common Among Withdrawing Students				
Generally	96	65	56	64
Occasionally	26	17	15	17
Unique	20	13	15	17
No Answer	8	5	2	2
	N=150	100%	N=88	100%
F. Reasons Self-Oriented or Imposed by Others				
Self	46	31	30	34
Self-others	62	41	40	45
Imposed by others	34	23	17	19
No Answer	8	5	2	2
	N=150	100%	N=89	100%
G. Reasons Involve Immediate Emergencies or Gradual Problems				
Urgent Today	34	22	12	14
Urgent this Week	47	31	40	45
Gradual this Term	53	35	31	35
Eventual	9	6	3	3
No Answer	7	4	3	3
	N=150	100%	N=89	100%

literature. There were few who gave reasons that could be considered peculiar, bizarre, or unique. The ones that were bizarre were most likely to be individuals with apparent emotional problems.

F. Reasons Self-Oriented or Imposed by Others - Their reasons for leaving were most likely to be self-oriented and to some degree imposed on them by others--primarily their family. Many of the students who were withdrawing had discussed this matter over carefully with their parents or spouse before making the decision. However, 31% of the men and 34% of the females were rated as being self-oriented.

G. Reasons Involve Immediate Emergencies or Gradual Problems - Most of the reasons did not involve an immediate emergency or urgent reason that cropped up quickly. They were more likely to be reasons that had developed gradually during the semester or had developed over a period of several weeks.

Table IV indicates the future college plans of the withdrawing students. The largest percentage of students indicated that they planned to return to the institution from which they withdrew. However, 17% of the males and 21% of the females stated they had no future college plans. Thirty-six percent of the males and 29% of the females said they were uncertain--and it would depend on what happened to them in the future.

Summary and Conclusions:

Summerskill (1962) found in his review of the literature that some of the important factors in attrition are low scholastic aptitude, poor academic performance, lack of motivation, emotional difficulties and financial problems. The findings of this study corroborated many of the reasons for

Table IV

The Future College Plans of the Dropouts

	MALE		FEMALE	
	N	%	N	%
No	25	17	19	21
Uncertain	54	36	26	29
California State College at Long Beach	59	39	32	36
Other College	11	7	13	14
No Answer	1	1	0	0
	N=150	100%	N=90	100%

attrition found by Summerskill and others. Of particular importance was the fact that the counselors, as a result of in-depth interviews with the students planning to withdraw, found considerably different reasons for their leaving than the students themselves.

The counselors' interpretations of the reasons for withdrawing were most likely to fall within the areas of financial problems, lack of motivation, college work being too difficult, and personal-emotional problems. Of relatively little importance for both the student and the counselor was poor grades. Poor grades, per se, did not seem to cause the student to withdraw. His lack of motivation and the fact that the work was difficult, in all probability would have led to poor grades, but poor grades could not be listed as one of the primary reasons for withdrawing from college. It would appear that many students with poor grades were more likely to remain in college and become academically disqualified at the end of the year. Perhaps some of those students who withdrew could portend the future. The students, on the other hand, rated the primary reasons for dropping out as falling within the areas of financial problems, work needs, military service (for the males), illness, (particularly for the females) and family problems (illness in the family).

On the basis of these findings it may be stated that counselors and administrators should be careful in assigning reasons for student withdrawals--that are surface reasons or reasons that are secured only from the students themselves. A considerable amount of error may result from this kind of

analysis. College and university personnel are encouraged to conduct similar kinds of research relative to their students' reasons for withdrawal, and more importantly, help determine what steps the college itself can take to ameliorate the potential losses in human resources that accrue from many of these withdrawals.

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ABSTRACT

ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE DROPOUTS - SOME MANIFEST AND COVERT REASONS

The article reiterates the still remaining and alarming statistics relative to students who do not complete their education. The author points out the shortage of talent which is ever increasing, especially in specific professions such as medicine and teaching. The importance for colleges throughout the country to engage in research and study pertaining to their particular attrition rates is emphasized. The importance of identifying the real reasons why students withdraw from colleges and universities is substantiated by citing studies which have been underway at California State College at Long Beach. One very important aspect of these studies indicates that the reasons given by the students withdrawing are not, many times, the true reasons as seen by trained counselors. It was also found that some success in having a student change his attitude and decision to withdraw occurs even after one interview with a trained and concerned counselor.